

USDA Deputy Under Secretary Ann Bartuska

Remarks at

Leveraging New Insights to Accelerate Progress Toward Sustainable Agricultural Systems

Thursday, September 16, 2010: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The National Press Club, 529 14th Street, NW

Good morning. It really is a pleasure as one of my first activities in this new role to be able to join you today. I knew it was going to be on the screen when I was in an acting capacity, but being permanent is actually really nice.

Thank you, Rob [Hedberg], for the introduction and some of the background. I do come back to the sustainability issue honestly. In my forest service role in the early 90's I was part of the core team that established some guidelines for sustainable forest management that has now been adopted globally by all the large forestry countries in the world.

This issue of sustainability and linking ecological, social and economic components is really one that has gone out of the boutique, niche market into something that I think is real. Having the opportunity to take the new National Research Council report and to use it and really to legitimize a lot of the discussions that people have been having is really outstanding.

I should start by thanking everybody for all your attendance here for being willing to participate in a day-long symposium, and also those who came together to put the symposium together. Certainly members of the USDA staff, but also they have thoroughly enjoyed being able to work with our other sponsors, the National Research Council, the Farm Foundation, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and the Organic Farming Research Foundation. Putting this together has really been an act of joy because of the types of things we have been able to do and to be able to bring this subject forward.

It has already been mentioned many times and I won't delve into it, but this is a re-look at an issue that began with an earlier report 20 years ago, and really being able to think about what have we accomplished from that earlier report in '89 to what we have now in 2010 and to really see how much change has happened and how much involvement there is. This really is a grassroots type of movement, a grassroots context that has really come into the mainstream.

Twenty years ago we really were not sure what sustainability meant. It was one of those terms that had been newly coined. Was it going to be a fad? Was it a code for something else? I think what we have learned is that sustainability actually captures the imagination but also the ability to think differently about our systems, whether they be agricultural practices or the larger issues of landscape conservation. Putting all those together I think is something that we are increasingly talking about.

What's so great for us within USDA is as we've thought about where our portfolio is going -- partly with this new Administration, partly what we've been thinking about for the 21st century -- the report really does capture a lot of the issues that we have been thinking about. It's very

consistent with something that we within USDA can use and that some of the program direction that we hope to take. As we all know, definitions are tough, especially those when you have a lot of different contrasting views. Being able to have something in place that we can all rally around and utilize is really incredibly valuable for us.

The other thing that comes from the report that I assume we all agree on is this is not the end game, rather it is the process that we use. It is a process of continuous improvement. For us I think it is a great opportunity to connect science and practice in an ongoing dialogue. To me one of the exciting new areas of science which frankly we don't know how to do is participatory research. How do you engage the larger community in defining research projects and also in evaluating, analyzing, and coming up with conclusions. This is a whole new world of integrating social science and biological sciences. It's one that we're all poised on the edge of doing, and this I think is an opportunity to bring that into the mainstream of USDA.

The other is that we're recognizing that it is a very inclusive concept. We were having earlier discussions about subsistence farming. Subsistence farming in the backyards of urban communities. Subsistence farming in Alaska and in tribal reservations. But we're also including the large production agricultural systems. How do you bring all of those together under the banner of sustainability?

Part of it is up from the ground, understanding what those real practices are. Part of it is bringing science to the table to really be able get some fundamental principles. But it is also opening the tent so we are all part of the solution. To me, again, both the report and this community are really bringing that into context. The way the sessions have been established for the day actually helps reinforce that.

The last thing, in terms of the context of this report, is it's about the science. I am really excited about being in this job because I really see the opportunity to integrate a whole lot of our science into being able to be deliberately focusing on things that are needed to improve practices. The end game of sustainability, the journey we have around sustainability, gives us a framework to do that. What I'm really pleased about and one of the reasons I took this job is how important science is in the USDA and the recognition by our Secretary and by the Administration that the management actions that we take need to be based on science. So how do we bring those two together in an effective way? This kind of a symposium helps us bridge those two pieces and bridge that gap.

This ongoing dialogue with scientists and the ongoing dialogue with the community is going to be a really powerful one.

I commend all of you on putting this symposium together by having the range of people who are here in the audience and who will be carrying on the discussion for the day. Maybe you'll set us up a nice research agenda for next year. I look forward to that, too. Thanks very much for having me here.